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1964/08/04

PHONE NOTES ---- THE PRESIDENT FROM SECY. MCNAMARA 9:43a AUG. 4, 1964

B Mr. President:

A Yes?

B General Wheeler and I are sitting here together and we just received a cable from Admiral Sharp making 3 recommendations with respect to our destroyer tracts and enemy actions responses and I wanted to mention it to you with a recommendation. I have discussed this with Dean Rusk and he and I are in agreement on the recommendation. Sharp recommends first ---- that the tract of the destroyer be shifted from 11 miles off shore to 8 miles off shore. This makes no sense to us, and we would recommend against it. His purpose by shifting the tract is simply to make clearer that we believe that the 12 mile limit is not effective on us...and we think that we do that adequately by sailing at 11 miles as opposed to 8. Secondly ----- Sharp recommends that we authorize the tract...

A What reason does he give for his 8?

B Simply that it more clearly indicates our refusal to accept a 12 mile restriction. We think that we have clearly indicated our refusal to accept a 12 mile restriction with the 11 mile limit, and there's no need to change the tract at this time.

A What other objections do you have?

B It...it...changes a program that shouldn't be changed frequently. These orders are very precise, and the tracts are laid down very clearly, they go through 3 command channels to get out there....this ship is allegedly to be attacked tonight.. we do not like to see a change in operational planning of this kind at this time. And we don't think that it achieves any international purpose --- certainly no military purpose is served by it.

A All right.

B Secondly ---- he recommends that the task force commander be authorized to pursue the attacking vessels in the event that he is attacked and destroy their bases... in this case...

A Wait just a minute... (talks to someone else in the room.) go ahead Mac.

B Secondly, he recommends that the task force commander be authorized to pursue any attacker and to destroy the base of the attacker. In this instance, if he were attacked by patrol boats it would mean that he would pursue the patrol craft into the shore line... identify the base of the patrol craft and destroy that base. Now this is an action that we might well wish to consider after the second attack, but I think that it would be inappropriate, - at least General Wheeler agrees and Dean Rusk agrees -- that it would be inappropriate to give the task force commander that authority. There will be ample time for us after a second attack to bring this problem to your attention, and you can then decide how far you wish to pursue the attacker into his base area.

A What objections do you have to pursuing it?

- B Only the objection that if we give such authority you have in a sense lost control of the degree of our response to the North Vietnamese. You don't know exactly what bases will be attacked in relation to population centers, how much force will be applied to it ... the attack and when it will occur. I personally would recommend after a second attack on our ships, that we do retaliate against the coast of North Viet Nam some way or another...and we will...
- A What I was thinking about when I was eating breakfast, but I couldn't talk ~~it~~ it I was thinking that it looks like the weakness of our position is that we respond only to an action and we don't have any of our own, but when they move on us, and they shoot at us....I think that we not only shoot at them, but almost simultaneously put one of these things ... that you've been doing...at one of their bridges..
- B Exactly...I quite agree with you, Mr. President...and I'm not sure that the response ought to be as Admiral Sharp suggests
- A I'm not either...I'm not either....I don't,....unless I knew what base it was and unless I was controlling it....but I wish that we could have something that we already picked out ...and just hit about 3 of them....damn quick.
- B We will have that.....and I talked to Mac Bundy a moment ago...and I thought that that was a most important subject....that we should consider today....and we were prepared to recommend to you a response ...a retaliation move against Viet Nam in the event that this attack takes place in the next 6 - 9 hours...
- A Yeah....well, we better do that at lunch....there's some things that I don't want to go in...with these others...I want to keep this close as I can...so let's just try to keep it with us.
- B I will be prepared to do so at lunch.
- A All right.
- B Now, thirdly ----Sharp recommends that the task force commander be authorized to engage in hot pursuit beyond the 11 mile limit in as far as the 3 mile limit... which we accept as the definition of territorial waters. At present the instructions to the commanders -- do not pursue a attacker closer to shore than 11 miles... Sharp recommends that that 11 mile limit be shifted to 3 miles. I've talked to Dean about this, and he agrees as far as air pursuit is concerned....pursue by air as close as 3 miles to shore....do not pursue by sea closer than 11 miles....his reason for differentiating sea from air, is that we can always argue that the air was further out than 3 miles and he's concerned about taking the ships in as close as 3 miles to shore. I'm willing to accept his point for a different reason however.. I don't think that ship ~~un~~ pursuit between 11 miles and 3 miles would be effective anyhow...because our ships travel about 27 knots and these patrol boats travel at 50 knots and the possibility of a ship being effective in that 3 - 11 mile area is not very great. The air power is more than likely the most effective power anyhow...and I would recommend that we accept Sharp's recommendation but limit it to air.

A All right, okay.

B Fine, thank you.

VIII

Secretary McNamara reported he and General Wheeler were meeting with reference to a cable just received from Admiral Sharp and the Admiral's three recommendations with respect to our destroyer tracts and enemy actions responses. The Secretary said he wanted to apprise the President about the matter and also give him his and Gen. Wheeler's recommendation that he had discussed the subject with Dean Rusk and they were both in agreement. The Secretary said:

"Sharp recommends first -- that the tract of the destroyer be shifted from 11 miles offshore to 8 miles offshore. This makes no sense to us and we would recommend against it. His purpose by shifting the tract is simply to make clearer that we believe that the 12-mile limit is not effective on us and we think that we do that adequately by sailing at 11 miles as opposed to 8. The reason he gives for the 8 is simply that it more clearly indicates our refusal to accept a 12-mile restriction. We think that we have clearly indicated our refusal to accept a 12-mile restriction with the 11-mile limit and there's no need to change the tract at this time.

"The other objections that we have are that it changes a program that shouldn't be changed frequently. These orders are very precise and the tracts are laid down very clearly. They go through three command channels to get out there. This ship is allegedly to be attacked tonight. We do not like to see a change in operational planning of this kind at this time and we don't think that it achieves any international purpose -- certainly no military purpose is served by it.

"Secondly, Admiral Sharp recommends that the task force commander be authorized to pursue the attacking vessels in the event that he is attacked and destroy their bases. In this instance, if he were attacked by patrol boats it would mean that he would pursue the patrol craft into the shore line, identify the base of the patrol craft and destroy that base. Now this is an action that we might well wish to consider after the second attack but I think that it would be inappropriate. General Wheeler and Dean Rusk agree that it would be inappropriate to give the task force commander that authority.

"If we give such authority you have in a sense lost control of the degree of our response to the North Vietnamese and that is my objection.

President Johnson said his thought was that it looked like a weakness in our position when we respond only to an action and we don't have any of our own and when they move and shoot at us, that we not only shoot at them but almost simultaneously apply what we've been doing at one of their bridges. Secretary agreed with the President and said he was very apprehensive of our response as suggested by Admiral Sharp.

Secretary McNamara added:

"Thirdly, Admiral Sharp recommends that the task force commander be authorized to engage in hot pursuit beyond the 11-mile limit in as far as the 3-mile limit, which we accept as the definition of territorial waters. At present the instructions to the commanders are -- do not pursue an attacker closer to shore than 11 miles. Admiral Sharp recommends that that 11-mile limit be shifted to 3 miles. I have talked to Dean Rusk about this and he agrees as far as air pursuit is concerned...pursue by air as close as 3 miles to shore...do not pursue by sea closer than 11 miles, his reason for differentiating sea from air is that we can always argue that the air was further out than 3 miles and he's concerned about taking the ships in as close as 3 miles to shore.

"I would recommend that we accept Admiral Sharp's recommendation but limit it to air."

President Johnson concurred with this.